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# The Pursuit of the Lucky Clew

By the author of "Nicholas Carter"

(Continued)

After he had gone Chick went over to the desk where the paper lay. It must have been something in there that had given his chief an inkling of the truth and started him upon the trail. Chick scanned the news sheet carefully, and at last he saw down in one corner an item that the ordinary man might have overlooked. In the margin beside it was the imprint of the chief's thumbnail—an indication that the chief had been deeply interested at that point. It was an unconscious habit that he had. When a thing attracted his especial attention, his hand seemed to close upon it, as if to hold it fast. Chick read the following:

## "HIS HAIR TURNED WHITE

### "SMITH SAYS HE SAW A GHOST

"Special from our Philadelphia Correspondent

"William Smith, alias 'blackleg Bill,' a noted criminal, recently freed from his ninth term in the penitentiary, had an experience the other night that he is not likely to forget in a hurry. He went to bed with a head of black hair and awoke to find that he was gray. Smith says he saw a ghost during the night, and has threatened to take the pledge—and stick to it. Neighbors allege that he returned home early in the morning of Friday last, in an intoxicated condition, and awakened the entire population of Harlem Court, a small thoroughfare running off Eighth Street above Noble, by his boisterous language. He swore that a ghost was following him, and, despite the appeals of his wife, locked himself in an upstairs closet and emerged late the next day to find he had lost his black locks."

## CHAPTER II

### THE MAN WITH THE WHITE HAIR

CHICK'S surmise had been correct—Nick Carter, with his keen eye, had seen a connection between the man with the white hair and the missing corpse. Blackleg Bill was a character of the Quaker Tenderloin, well known to the great detective. He had, from time to time, been imprisoned for almost every possible

crime, except that of murder, and Nick knew that he would not stop at that if he were caught in a corner. Of course, he had no means of knowing positively that Blackleg Bill was one of the links in the chain of evidence that the Philadelphia police force was forging—but he intended to find out for a certainty.

It was with this determination in mind that he had left New York so suddenly. It was noon when he reached his destination, and, before proceeding farther, he lunched at a hotel near the Broad Street Station. During the meal he planned his course of action, and, following it out, he found himself in Harlem Court as the steeple clocks were striking one. He was at a loss for an excuse that would take him into the house at No. 807, wherein his man lived, but he recalled an old ruse, and without further ado he rang the bell. After waiting a few minutes a second-story window was raised, and the uncombed head of an old woman greeted Nick's uplifted eyes.

"What do ye want?" she demanded, in a high pitched voice that was almost a screech.

"I want to speak to you for a minute," said Nick, calmly.

"We don't want nothing to-day," was the quick reply.

"I'm not selling anything; I want to buy."

"We ain't got nothing to sell," and down came the window with a bang. Nick Carter was not to be put off by a woman. He was baffled, but only for a moment. Then he tried the door, and greatly to his surprise, it opened! Scarcely had he stepped within the small room that was used for a parlor, than the woman was before him. She had suddenly remembered that the front door was unlocked—and had almost leaped down the flight of stairs to head off the detective.

"You seem to be in a hurry," said Nick, as he faced her.

"You impudent devil! How dare you enter in a lady's house without no permission! I've a notion to call the police for ye, so I have! You get out of here right off! The idea of enterin' a decent, respectable lady's parlor without bein' asked! If my husband wasn't drunk I'd get him to beat the brains out of ye!" And in her anger she grasped a light chair near at hand and would have struck the detective had he not been too quick for her. His arm caught the force of the blow, and the chair fell splintered to the floor.

"My good woman," he said, coolly, "don't get excited. It isn't at all becoming to a pretty young creature like you."

"What do ye want?" she asked, when her anger had left her.

"Your dear husband has something in his possession that he may want to sell me."

Instantly the woman's manner changed.

"Lord knows we need the money, sir, however much it may be. I'm a poor, hard-working woman, sir. I takes in washin', sir, and makes a livin' for meself. Me poor husband's been so sickly of late; he ain't nothin' like he used to be; he used to huckster before he took ill, and we made enough between us to keep the wolf away—but now I has to feed two mouths. He's upstairs, sir. And would you care to go up and see him? He's in bed, sir, and if you wants to buy anything he has, sir, you can buy it." She paused and then whispered in the detective's ear: "I'll make him sell it, whatever it is."

Nick slipped a dollar into her willing hand and followed her up a flight of narrow stairs.

"I hope he ain't been stealin' again," said the woman. "I've tried to make a man of him, sir, but he slips away and misses his Sunday-school sometimes. But if he's been stealin' again, sir, I'll break every bone in his drunken body. I've tried so hard to learn him to do right, because I loved him so, sir. But I guess it ain't no use tryin' to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear like him."

By now they had entered a dingy back room, where, sprawled out upon an old mattress, in one corner, lay Blackleg Bill.

"Here's a gent as wants to see ye, Bill," said the woman, as she kicked the prostrate form of the man she addressed.

Bill awakened with a start, and, springing upon his feet, he ran into the corner of the room and huddled himself together.

"Ye see, Bill's got the snakes for sure this time," explained the woman, unsympathetically. "He's afraid of his own shadder."

"I see," said Nick, but it was something entirely different that the great detective saw, for in Blackleg Bill's action he saw a man who had really been frightened. Nick had seen men in the last stages of delirium tremens, but their condition was not like that of Blackleg Bill.

"I'm expectin' the doctor now at any minute," the woman went on; "that's how it came that ye found the door open."

"Leave us alone for a moment," said Nick, kindly. "I want to talk privately with your husband."

The woman reluctantly withdrew, but returned almost immediately to say:

"Now don't be skeered of the gent, Bill. He ain't no reporter nor a cop. He's got some dough fer ye." And out she went once more, closing the door after her. Nick waited until he was sure, from the sound of the creaking stairs, that the woman had reached the room below, and then he turned to the man who still cowered in the corner.

"Bill, your game's up," he said. "Doc sent me to warn you that the police had found him out."

Bill seemed to regain his lost senses at once.

"Found him out!" Bill gasped.

"They've found the girl."

"You're lyin' to me. They couldn't find 'er. Doc told me she's a handful of ashes, an' Doc Donelson knows his business."

"I'm afraid the doctor lied to you."

"What do ye mean?"

"That they found the body in his cellar."

"Then let 'im hang fer it. I didn't do no dirty work! I didn't even git paid fer bein' scared to death. It was a put up job from the start. All he wants me for is to pick the lock on the vault. Him and the undertaker had the cadaver all fixed up with springs, an' after I opens the lid an' slides de ring off, doc he presses de button an' de thing sits up an' looks me in de face. Dat was my finish. I drops the sparkler and gits. I ain't been sober sinct, an' ye kin bet yer bottom dollar ye don't find me a-swipin' any more stiffs fer nobody. Me an' Doc Donelson's done, see?"

But Nick Carter was busy congratulating himself upon the success of his scheme. Blackleg Bill had been an easy mark for him. He had learned two very important points in the case, which the police had not yet discovered. First, that the vault had been broken open by a professional body snatcher, and, second, that he was in the employ of the best known poison expert in the world—Dr. Henry Donelson. This was, indeed, startling intelligence. He was on the trail of the diamond ring; he had found the man who had removed it from the body of the dead girl. He had no reason to doubt the

story as Blackleg Bill had told it. The undertaker was in the employ of the physician. This accounted for the fact that the body was not embalmed. The poison expert probably intended to test a new poison in some manner upon what the initiated term a "clean" corpse; that is to say, a dead body that has not been filled with a preserving fluid. This was quite possible. It was also possible that the doctor had arranged the corpse upon springs. Perhaps it was not his intention to frighten Blackleg Bill with the contrivance, but had arranged it as a matter of protection against other grave robbers and had forgotten to explain the matter to his companion in crime. That Bill had dropped the ring, in fright, after having removed it, was also plausible. From that point it was easy to imagine that the doctor had gained possession of it and had disposed of it through the agency of another person in his employ, before the robbery of the vault had been discovered. Thus far Nick Carter's clew was working like a charm. He needed now to learn the name and residence of the undertaker. The physician's address could be had from the city directory. He dared not ask the question of Blackleg Bill, for that worthy must not know his identity—or his case would be lost.

As to the dead girl, Nick Carter had almost concluded that she would never be found. He argued that in all likelihood the poison expert had experimented with the body and had afterward destroyed it by the use of some powerful acids.

"Well, what move are you going to make?" Nick asked of the criminal before him.

"What kin I do?" he replied, in dejection. "No matter where I tries ter hide, the sleuth hounds will run me to earth. There ain't no place in this world fer a guilty man. I've found that much out ter me sorrow. I don't know who ye are, sir, but I wants ter tell ye from me heart that if yer a friend of Doc Donelson take my advice and give 'im the cold shake. He's goin' ter swing one o' these days. I been bad sinct I was a kid. I wisht I had it all to go over again. I know jes' how dif'rent I'd live me life. I'd be decent, I would. I'd be square an' honest; afore God I swear it. Me muther use ter say they ain't no rest fer the wicked, an' I tell ye' me old muther was right. I ain't had a good night's sleep fer years. I've tried ter drown me troubles in rum, but it ain't no use.

Whiskey don't wash the worry out of ye. I won't move an inch to get out of the way of any punishment that's coming ter me fer bein' mixed up in this thing. If there's a yard of rope ready fer me neck I may as well feel it now as later on."

For once in his life Nick Carter's heart softened. He felt sorry for the poor misguided wretch before him.

"Bill, you have been bad in your time, and many a man has been hanged for half the crimes you've committed. But if you tell me that you are honestly sorry and want to begin over again—why you'll find me the first to give you a helping hand. It isn't often that I feel any sympathy for men like you, but you are old enough now to know that the only way to be happy is to be good."

"Yer right. But I'm goin' ter take me medicine fer this thing, and when I git out into the open air again, I'm goin' ter move away somewhere an' begin over."

"Bill, there's my hand," said the great detective, all the greater for his kindness. "I'm going to see you through this scrape. Stick to me and I'll stick to you."

"But yer Doc Donelson's friend, an' mebbe yer as big a liar as he is. How do I know?"

"Suppose that I did not know Dr. Donelson?"

"What de ye mean!" Bill demanded.

"I said, suppose that I did not know Dr. Donelson."

"Do ye mean to say that ye came in here an' lied to me an' made me tell ye all I knew?"

"There are a great many kinds of lies, Bill, and the one I told you could do no harm to an innocent person."

"Yer a cop!" Bill almost shouted.

"Well?" asked Nick, calmly.

"An' ye've come ter pinch me!" said Bill, in anger.

"That was my original intention."

"Then let me tell ye that one of us ain't goin' ter leave this room alive."

"How quickly you have forgotten your resolution to turn over a new leaf."

"Resolutions ain't got nothin' ter do with takin' a mean advantage of a sick man. Yer a dirty sneak!"

"You seem determined to fight," said Nick Carter, as he leisurely lighted a cigar in the very face of the irate Bill.

"I'll give ye an even chance."

"I'm afraid we're badly matched. Only good men should fight good men—and they never do. William, you couldn't give me an even chance; you are several shades too far to the bad."

"I've got me own weapon," Bill continued, as his anger arose. And he drew from his pocket an old-fashioned revolver.

"And I've got two and a badge," said Nick, as he quickly drew two revolvers from his pockets, and, with a sudden turn of his hand, opened his coat to display his official shield.

Bill reluctantly returned his revolver to his pocket. Nick replaced his own.

"I told you," he said, "that if you stuck to me I'd save your life. I mean that. Between us we will probably hang your friend, the doctor."

"Why, who are you?" came a voice from behind the detective.

Nick turned to find that a stranger had entered the room at some point during the argument.

"Nicholas Carter, detective," was the reply. "And whom have I the pleasure of addressing?" the sleuth inquired.

"The gentleman you are going to hang, Henry Donelson, M. D.," returned the other, very quietly.

The two men shook hands.

### CHAPTER III.

#### A FRESH CLEW AND A COFFIN

**D**R. DONELSON and Nick Carter left the home of Blackleg Bill together, much to the latter's amazement. The two parted at the end of the court, to all appearances, the best of friends. Nick Carter realized, as he went his way, that he had come face to face with the strongest foe he had ever encountered. This doctor, if he were a criminal—and there was but little doubt that he was—was, indeed, a clever one. He was a man of brains, and would likely put the detective upon his mettle. The detective's first inclination was to follow the man, but he soon saw that this would be folly. If the physician were really the principal in the case he would take good care of his movements. Shadowing was out of the question.



—at least by the detective himself. And yet the undertaker and his whereabouts must be learned. This was of vital importance. The police, who knew, guarded their secret with the utmost caution.

A happy circumstance occurred which gave Nick Carter his desired information. It seemed to the great detective as if a prayer had been answered. He met, at the corner of Eighth and Spring Garden, by the merest chance, Frank Townsend, a reporter upon the staff of the *Philadelphia Express*.

"Hello, Frank!" was his jovial greeting.

"Well, Nick, I don't suppose there is any use in asking what brings you over here? You wouldn't tell me, even if I were to guess it right the very first time. But I'll bet a nickel to a doughnut that you are busy with the Martin case!"

"Perhaps I am. Why, is there anything new?"

"That depends upon how much you already know."

"Well, that's very little."

"You can take my word for it that there is no use in you trying to learn any more. I'm sore about the whole blamed thing! I've had the case worked out in twenty different ways; names, dates, figures and the whole shooting match, and that's about all the good it did me. The editor simply glanced at the copy, glanced at me—frowned his own delightful frown—and shoved the copy in the nearest pigeon-hole. The case is dead, so far as the police are concerned. The men are too big."

"You don't mean that political——"

"Pull," added the reporter. "It's pull, pull, pull in this town. Donelson is nothing but a common body snatcher, for all his pretense at anything else. Why he's a member of the Union League. But he's got the pull, and he and McFarlan will never be touched. You mark my words."

"So the police are doing nothing?" asked Nick.

"Not a thing."

"And your paper won't print the names of the men who are concerned?"

"Not a name."

"But why? Has your editor given you no excuse?"

"He only made one remark to me about it since the story started on its rounds."

"And what was that?" asked Nick, much interested.

"Find the girl."

"And that was all he said?"

"Every word."

"I think that was quite enough."

"Why?" inquired the reporter, somewhat surprised.

"Because you can't make out a clear case until the girl is found."

"Do you suppose that girl can be found?"

"Why not?"

"Why," said the reporter, in a manner that indicated that he knew what he was talking about. "That stiff has been either buried, boiled up, or sunk in the river. The men who stole the corpse are not dummies."

"I quite agree with you, they know their business."

"Just to show you how much interest the police are taking in the case, they haven't even disturbed the box the girl was stolen from. It's out there in the vault yet."

"By jingo! That reminds me!" said Nick, suddenly. "I've got to wire New York at once. Or, better still, I think I will take the first train over. So long, Townsend. See you later."

And the detective hurried off, watched for some little distance by the amused reporter.

At the nearest telegraph office Nick sent a dispatch of some length, in cipher, to his New York office. Then, hurrying down the street, he entered a pawnbroker's shop, and, after disclosing his identity to the pawnbroker, he purchased a few handy burglar tools. With these safely stowed away in his pockets, he came upon the street again, and after a momentary thought, he went into a cafe and sat down at one of the tables. He looked at his watch, and, discovering that it was nearly five o'clock, he ordered a light supper, and while waiting for it, he indulged in a fresh cigar—and a few very important thoughts.

He had been successful in running his first clew to earth. He had started from New York that morning with the intention of tracing a diamond ring—backward. The ring was now in the possession of the police—but only Nick Carter and the criminals themselves knew just how it had reached its present place.

He glanced at the top of a nearby newspaper and read the weather indications. It was to be clear, somewhat colder—and moonless. Just such a night in June as best suited the detective's plan.

Then he recalled his talk with the reporter. Townsend had given him much more information than he had imagined, and Nick Carter had been careful to keep this fact from the reporter. For one thing, he had learned that the undertaker's name was McFarlan.

A man sat down at the table opposite. As their eyes met they smiled, and, finally, Nick Carter, extending his hand, laughingly said:

"Well, Col. Chesterton, of all men! Where did you drop from? I thought you were in California."

"Just got back to-night. Was passing here, and, happening to look in, I recognized you, although your back was turned. Couldn't go on till I had shaken your hand. Haven't time to say more now. Meet me at the Union League to-night, any time before ten. Now don't disappoint me." Nick Carter nodded affirmatively and Col. Chesterton made his exit.

"Hum!" said Nick, as he caught a glimpse of the disappearing coat tails of his friend. "If I get off with my life to-night, I will see you at the League before ten."

(To be continued)



The man with the pick-axe is sweating over something.